

From the Daily Sentinel Newspaper, Grand Junction, Colorado, June 11, 1978, by Bill Conrad.

SILVERTON—If a lot of miners are seen going to church here today, it's probably because they didn't go to work last Sunday.

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Of course they will probably have a mixed reaction, since they won't be going to work for some time yet, but at least they have their lives.

What they're thankful to have missed was a wall of water that burst through the American Tunnel Sunday night, spewing mine equipment, mine timbers and debris out the portal of the mine like shot from a cannon. A witness said a wave of water five to six feet high roared from the tunnel.

The water had come from Lake Emma, eighty-five feet above the uppermost workings of the mine, when the bottom of the lake gave way and the water went down like a giant had pulled the plug of the bathtub.

Any other day of the week, even just fifteen hours later, sixty-five miners would have been working in the immediate area of the cave-in, and another eighty would have been elsewhere in the mine.

Damage to the Standard Metals Sunnyside Mine is tremendous. It is estimated that five to ten million gallons of water carried tons of tailings and lake-bottom sediments down 1,700 vertical feet through the upper four levels of the mine to the American Tunnel.

Virgil Mason, Sheriff of San Juan County, called to the scene, saw on his way up the canyon "a wave that must have been eight to ten feet high rushing down the creek. At the portal, it was like a UFO movie. Everything was black, the portal and timbers were shooting out like they were shot from a launcher."

But damage to the mine was not the end of the problem. The wall of water went on seven miles down Cement Creek to Silverton and into the Animas River.

Flood warnings were sent to residents along the river, but no serious flooding developed. What did develop was at least as serious: Pollution.

Durango, fifty miles down the Animas, was warned in time to shut off its pumps and keep the lead and zinc-polluted water out of its system. But downstream in New Mexico, Aztec and Farmington got no warning.

As a Durango resident put it Thursday, "Aztec and Farmington are really mad at Colorado today."

The La Plata County Basin Health Unit took samples from the river and got results back from Denver Wednesday. The findings were that lead and zinc exist in the river, and residents were warned not to use the water for drinking.

The lead and zinc came from tailings of old workings on the shores of Lake Emma, which was located just above Sunnyside. The tailings had been there since nineteenth century mining, and when the lake bottom fell in, the tailings washed down with the water.

At Bakers Bridge, above Durango, samples tested show zinc in the water at 12.6 parts per million and lead at 4 parts per million. Bob Balliger, acting director for Basin Health Unit, said the safe level for metals in human consumption is .05 total parts per million.

The reason for a heavy concentration of lead and zinc in the old tailings washed down by the water is that nineteenth century miners were after only gold, leaving the base metals.

Standard Metals takes gold, zinc, copper, silver and lead from the ore.

The city of Durango gets most of its water, 5.8 million gallons per day, from the Florida River, which was unaffected by the deluge, but usually takes 1.5 million gallons of water per day from the Animas.

At this time last year, the city was using an average of six million gallons of water per day.

Water from the Animas was cut off early Monday, and the city reservoir, which holds about 74 million gallons, has dropped more than two feet since then.

Lawn watering restrictions have been put into effect and citations promised to violators.

A veterinarian with the Colorado Department of Health said the water poses no threat to livestock, and agriculture specialists are checking to see if it will effect crops.

Meanwhile, Standard Metals officials are working overtime, according to The Durango Herald, to see if the \$1 million dollar operation can open in the immediate future.

Miners in Silverton said the stope where the cave-in occurred was one of the richest, which is why that particular area was being mined.

The stope was eighty-five feet from the lake bottom, said D.K. Slade, mine supervisor, but Jerry Ott, Standard Metals general manager, said some other stopes were closer to the floor of the lake.

It was theorized that the lake water came down through a fault and broke into the mine.

A couple of Standard Metals employees, going on snowmobiles and on foot to the ridge above the lake, found a hole two hundred by four hundred feet around and seventy feet deep where the lake had been.

The lake is now empty, but spring runoff from the mountains around is draining into the hole, and a steady stream continues to pour from the mine.

Today, 225 miners are out of work as a result. ♣